# BELARUS

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## Introduction

Belarus is one of the most stable authoritarian regimes with an extremely restricted media system. The regime emerged around 1995-96 and since then, it has operated an increasingly controlled network of legacy media that manipulate public opinion. This network relies on underlying tactics of disinformation rooted in old-school media manipulation used during the Soviet times, aimed at defaming political opponents of the regime and spreading misinformation (*Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2018). National television remains a state monopoly, state institutions own major newspapers and the state regulates FM waves. The government uses these state-controlled media, along with selective financial support for content producers, restrictive laws and intimidation of users, to introduce manipulation into the online landscape (Freedom House, 2019).

However, the online landscape remains mostly free from government control and manipulation. There are several reasons for this. First, Belarus' government largely does not censor online content. Second, media that are independent from the state dominate online space when it comes to news originating from Belarus. However, as more people have started using social media actively and the scale of anti-government protest mobilization has grown recently, the regime has begun to invest more resources into social media manipulation. In this context, it makes sense to distinguish between media controlled by the state ("state-controlled") and "independent media" outlets. Russia is a major player in the Belarusian media market. Russian propagandists enjoy considerable influence on the Belarusian population, making Belarus very susceptible to Kremlin-backed propaganda (Freedom House, 2019).

## An Overview of Cyber Troop Activity in Belarus
### Organizational Form

There are four types of major actors that are involved in social media manipulation in Belarus. They are the state, the media, private individuals, and pro-Russian groups. First, the government seemed to be a key source of domestic online misinformation and disinformation in Belarus in recent years. It uses state news outlets, troll armies and the police to spread misinformation online. The Belarusian government controls more than six hundred news outlets (Freedom House, 2019). Examples of such outlets are the newspaper SB: Belarus Today that is owned by the administration of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, president since 1994, as well as three key state-owned television companies Belarus 1, ONT and CTV. Second, many misinformation narratives and disinformation stories originate from state-controlled media. In 2020, "every state outlet showed evidence of propaganda and manipulation," an independent media monitoring report suggests (Bykovskyy, 2020).

Third, several troll groups that are linked to the state operate in Belarus. The media link a key troll farm to a pro-state youth union known as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM). The farm was set up by the union in 2011 following a series of Arab Spring-inspired protests. The union created it to oppose "dirt and lies" on social media (Herasimenka, 2013). The idea and aims are reminiscent of the 50-cent Army of human propagandists set up by the Chinese government. Within a year of the BRSM announcement, job adverts appeared that promised $10 per text that should be shared on "pro-opposition forums" (Viasna Human Rights Center, 2012). The aim of the job was to show "support for the ruling regime." Later the same year, an opposition candidate who ran in the 2012 parliamentary election faced a trolling campaign aimed at discrediting his candidacy on social media (Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, 2012). By 2013, the BRSM created at least 430 pages and groups on VK, the most popular social media platform in Belarus that time. These groups and pages had an audience of at least 105,882 users (Herasimenka, 2013). In 2015 independent media confirmed the existence of the BRSM troll army based on evidence of coordinated activities (NN.by, 2015).

Fourth, members of the police force use fake accounts to harass activists and discredit them. One of the first uses of fake accounts to defame political opponents and trick journalists was reported back in 2012 (Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, 2012). Since 2017, the police have been engaging in misinformation activity to target most radical political activists such as anarchist organizations. Specifically, anarchist activists accused the police forces of polluting social media platforms with fake accounts to monitor their activities and, in some cases, to harass them. Anarchist groups reported at least fifty-four accounts and pages on Facebook, Telegram and VK that were used for this purpose (*The Republican List of Rubbish Materials*, 2020). Some of these accounts published pictures and other private information obtained by the police during raids that targeted anarchists and other radical activists. This strategy targeted high-profile activists within the community and spread disinformation about them  (Viasna Human Rights Center, 2019).

There are also signs of non-political misinformation that circulates in Belarus. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 171 social media accounts that originated in Belarus shared at least 229 posts that contained misinformation about the influence of 5G technology on the spread of the virus (Baltic Internet Policy Initiative, 2020). Most of this information originated on the Russia-owned social media platform VK.

**Table 1: Organizational Form and Prevalence of Social Media Manipulation in Belarus**

| Initial Report | Government Agencies | State-controlled media | Politicians & Parties | Private Contractors | Civil Society Organizations | Citizens & Influencers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2011 | The police | Belarus 1, ONT, CTV, NTV-Belarus, SB | | | Troll farms: the BSRM | Evidence Found |

**Source:** Authors' evaluations based on data collected.

## Strategies, Tools, and Techniques

The prime sources of manipulative content on social media in Belarus are human-operated accounts. They cover social media platforms, websites, and messaging apps. There is little evidence of automated online programs in use.

Social media disinformation in Belarus often originates from the accounts of state-controlled outlets and groups. State-controlled media harass political opposition and minority voices and deceive the public into believing this disinformation. Up to 77.27% of news content broadcasted by three leading state-controlled television channels—Belarus 1, ONT, CTV—in November 2019 contained signs of propaganda and manipulation (Media IQ, 2020). This content mostly covered domestic politics such as the parliamentary election. These state-controlled outlets also try to present Belarus as the only stable country in the region, while framing its political system as the only credible one. Common narratives that mention foreign countries include presenting the EU institutions as "weak" and promising an imminent collapse of the West (Chulitskaya, 2019). Many of those narratives align with storylines propagated by local junk news outlets that are linked to Russia, such as vitbich.org and mogilew.by (Chulitskaya, 2019).

Trolling tactics rely on human users who spread pro-government information in the comment sections of leading independent media. Over the past decade, trolls praising the regime and denouncing the opposition have increased their operation significantly (Freedom House, 2019). Their purpose is to mobilize public opinion and to criticize any type of regime opponents. Several popular independent outlets claim that they have become victims of troll farms. According to the editors of leading news outlets that include Nasha Niva and Tut.by, these farms target comment sections on their websites to attack pro-democracy activists and regime opponents and to promote pro-government narratives (NN.by, 2015, 2020). There are also some signs of troll farms operating on social media platforms. However, it does not appear that they function as the major source of misinformation on social media. The platforms most impacted by disinformation are Facebook, OK, Telegram, VK and YouTube.

**Table 2: Observed Strategies, Tools and Techniques of Social Media Manipulation in Belarus**

| Account Types | Messaging and Valence | Content and Communication Strategies | Platforms |
|---|---|---|---|
| Human | Pro-government messages, messages attacking foreign states, attacks on the opposition, the government, polarization strategies, trolling and harassment | Telegram channels, fake VK and Facebook accounts, YouTube channels, memes, misinformation websites | Telegram, YouTube, VK, Facebook, Twitter |

**Source:** Authors' evaluations based on data collected.

## Organizational Capacity and Resources

The propaganda efforts appear to be both centrally coordinated and decentralized. Central coordination takes place through the government structures such as the office

of the president, who controls all key figures in the police and state media. Certain groups of trolls operate in a more decentralized manner. However, their origins and affiliations are uncertain. There is scarce information available about the resource spent to support manipulation efforts. State-controlled media outlets are present in all regions of Belarus and require significant resources. As all of them share manipulative political content, we may safely assume that a portion of their 2020 state budget funding of $73 million (an increase compared to 2019) will be directed at propaganda (Law of the Republic of Belarus 'On republican budget for 2020', 2019).

**Table 3: Cyber Troop Capacity in Belarus**

| Team Size | Resources Spent (USD) | Activity Levels | Coordination | Capacity Measure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| >100 | 73 million to be spent to support state-controlled media in 2020 | State backed media, troll groups and Russian-backed channels operate on a constant basis. | Somewhat centralized | Belarus troops: Low. Russian troops in Belarus: high |

**Source:** Authors' evaluations based on data collected.

A key foreign player in the Belarusian disinformation market is Russia. Belarus might be one of the most vulnerable countries to the influence of the Russian state propaganda. More than 40% of the population considered the Russian state-controlled television channels their main sources of information (Laputska & Papko, 2017). Two-thirds of all the content that is being broadcasted in Belarus originates from Russia (Laputska & Papko, 2017). Chulitskaya (2020) identified 64 actors—mostly junk news websites—that disseminated pro-Russian narratives online. These actors operated 149 social media groups, pages, profiles, and websites. A Warsaw-Based research center EAST identified at least 40 news outlets that are based in Belarus and focus on local agenda but are openly or covertly supported by Russia. Outlets such as vitbich.org, sozh.info and grodnodaily.net have a probable link to Russia through its embassy and other connections (Yeliseyeu, 2019). Sputnik Belarus, a branch of a vast news network Sputnik that is controlled by the Russian government, is one of the most visited online news sources that focus on Belarus (Yeliseyeu, 2020). The key narrative that Sputnik Belarus broadcasted in 2019 included "Belarusians as part of the Russian nation," "the west aggressiveness towards Belarus" and "neighbouring countries that joined the EU are degrading" (Yeliseyeu, 2020). The Russian news aggregators Yandex and Mail.ru also play a significant agenda-setting role for more than 30% of Belarusian internet users (SimilarWeb Website Ranking, 2020). However, the level of activity of Russian disinformation in Belarus is cyclical and depends on the relationship between Moscow and Minsk. Over recent years, Russian propaganda expanded significantly during periods of political discord between the two governments. During these periods, Russian-controlled websites and Telegram accounts carried out vitriolic campaigns against both state and non-state actors in Belarus (Freedom House, 2019).

Following the post-election protests in August 2020, the Belarus government invited a team of technicians, journalists and leaders from RT, a Russian television channel that was frequently found to spread misinformation, to substitute for local state television workers who resigned in protest (Cornaz, 2020).

## Response

To respond to the growing amount of disinformation online, non-state actors have attempted to build fact-checking infrastructure, increase the reach of verified information and debunk junk news. Government actors are mostly concerned with information that originates in Russia. Recently, the Belarusian state has been increasingly conscious of the threat posed by information interference from Russia in domestic political debates. A crucial mechanism used by the Belarusian government to respond to this foreign state-backed misinformation is its own media network. The narrative of Russian state attempts to influence the situation in Belarus is dominant in Belarusian state media (Bykovskyy, 2020). To this end, the government has adopted a new Information Security Concept in March 2019 that is based around the goals of "information sovereignty." The Concept prioritizes state control of the information space. The most recent Freedom House (2019) report suggests that "the concept likely entails a greater response to Russia's increasingly aggressive disinformation and propaganda targeting the Lukashenka administration". As one expert put it, the concept "is aimed at ensuring the information security of the authorities" not the people" (Belarus Security Blog, 2019).

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